



Nevada Natural Resources Status Report



Wild Horses and Burros

Wild Horse and Burro Populations

The federal Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of 1971 requires the BLM and USFS to protect, manage, and control wild free-roaming horses and burros on public lands at population levels that assure a "thriving natural ecological balance" under the multiple use concept. The Act defines ecological balance as the balance on a long-term sustained yield basis between populations of wild horses, burros and wildlife, livestock, and rangeland vegetation. The federal agencies manage wild horses and burros at the minimum feasible level to treat the animals as wildland species and not as livestock. Management focuses on monitoring, removal of excess animals, preparing them for adoption, the adoption process, and compliance after adoption for one year when title is given.

Wild horses and burros are found throughout the western states, but nowhere do their populations come close to those in Nevada. The first aerial count, conducted in 1974, found approximately 20,000 animals. In 2000, the BLM estimated a total of 48,624 wild horses and burros roamed BLM land in the 10 western states, of which 25,096 (52 percent) inhabited Nevada (Table 3-14). In 1996, the USFS estimated that 746 wild horses occupied Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest land within Nevada. Most of the wild horses and burros in Nevada live on open rangeland managed by the BLM. Though the large number of animals has brought national and even international attention from wild horse enthusiasts, the vegetation and water resources in areas overpopulated by wild horses have been seriously impacted.

Federal agencies initially identified wild horse Herd Areas based on animal distributions at the time federal legislation was passed. Within Herd Areas, the BLM has delineated 103 Herd Management Areas (HMA's) and the USFS delineated 13 Horse Territories. These wild horse areas are distributed throughout the state. The HMA's managed for wild horses are located primarily in the Great Basin ecoregion. In the Mojave region, the habitat is better suited to burros. The HMA's vary in size from as small as 5,000 acres to almost 700,000 acres, with most exceeding 100,000 acres. Land designated as HMA's also contains livestock grazing allotments and populations of wildlife species.

Wild Horse and Burro Management

Because forage production on Nevada rangelands is limited and must be shared among wildlife, livestock, and wild horses, public rangeland managers are required to set the Appropriate Management Level (AML) for wild horses and burros on each HMA. The number of wild horses, or AML, is set through a rangeland assessment and public review process known as the Allotment Evaluation/Multiple Use Decision. The AML is the number of wild horses that can inhabit a herd management area while maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance and avoiding deterioration of the rangeland and riparian resources.

Table 3-14. Wild Horse and Burro Populations and Amounts Removed, 1980 - 2000

Year	Population*	Removals*
1980	32,199	---
1981	---	---
1982	27,810	---
1983	---	---
1984	31,395	1,410
1985	30,569	10,440
1986	28,872	5,444
1987	28,533	6,026
1988	28,401	4,294
1989	30,067	1,300
1990	29,455	3,023
1991	33,434	4,168
1992	34,877	3,632
1993	26,654	5,103
1994	23,107	5,328
1995	24,067	6,701
1996	23,483	5,884
1997	22,955	6,295
1998	22,463	4,581
1999	23,935	2,500
2000	25,096	4,131
2001	22,100	---
Total Removals		81,408

Source: Nevada BLM, 2001.

Note: *Includes only lands managed by Nevada BLM, not those managed by California BLM in northwestern Nevada.

Table 3-14
Wild Horse and Burro Populations and
Amounts Removed, 1980 - 2000
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As of September 2000, the AML had been achieved on thirty-eight (38) of the BLM managed HMA's. During the winter, additional gathers increased the number of HMA's achieving the AML by five. Four more HMA's are scheduled for gathers in the summer of 2001. As with many wild animal populations, the number of wild horses increases each year at a rate that is determined by the amount of seasonal precipitation and vegetative growth. Achieving and maintaining AML within herd management areas requires periodic removal of horses. From 1980 to 2000, the BLM removed over 81,400 wild horses (Table 3-13). The status of wild horse management on HTNF herd territories in Nevada is not available.

Recent fires and drought in the Great Basin have impacted wild horse habitat conditions. During the summer of 1999, wild fires burned approximately 1.6 million acres of land administered by the BLM. Twelve HMA's were burned, with the losses extreme enough in seven HMA's to require removals of



Wild horses roam throughout the open range in southern Nevada. Careful population management is necessary in some areas where reproduction is high and resources are sensitive to excessive grazing and trampling, such as riparian zones. Protection of wild horse herds attracts national, even international attention. Photo courtesy of the Nevada Commission for the Preservation of Wild Horses.

all or a portion of the herds. In total, 2,070 animals were removed as a result of habitat losses from the fires. About 340 wild horses were being held for reintroduction into the burned HMA's from where they were gathered. The following winter of 1999/2000 was extremely dry and a number of HMA's were impacted by inadequate water supplies, forage or both. As a result, 1,980 wild horses and burros were removed in the summer of 2000 from 14 HMA's. The removals were targeted toward those herds severely impacted by the drought conditions. Only a few HMA's were reduced to the AML. With the emphasis on emergency gathers due to habitat damaged by fires and drought, most of the planned gathers scheduled for FY 2000 were postponed. Less than 100 animals were removed from scheduled gathers.

BLM is charged with managing the public land for multiple uses. With the passage of the Wild and Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971, which came about because of nationwide concerns, BLM was mandated to

manage those resources along with the multitude of other legitimate land uses. The competition for forage, of course, creates the greatest conflict.

The act states that horses and burros must be managed within a "thriving ecological balance." BLM has interpreted that to mean that the forage use by all grazing animals must be within the carrying capacity of the land. BLM rangeland grazing standards and guidelines have been established for four regions in the state by Resource Advisory Councils in each region. The standards describe regional soil, vegetation, water, wildlife habitat conditions, with the resource use and management guidelines, that are necessary to sustain the carrying capacity and ecological functions of rangeland resources consistent with community needs in the region. Maintaining wild horse populations at AML is important if the Rangeland Standards are to be met and the land managed at a "thriving ecological balance." Continued overstocking of the public lands by any one or a combination of grazing animals, domestic or wild, can create long-term degradation of rangeland resources and ultimately destroy the productivity of the land.

The adoption program is the only available option to care for animals removed from the range. The adoption market is very fragile and numerous forces affect that market, including publicity on the Wild Horse and Burro program. The adoption market also affects range management because if adoption targets are not met, BLM preparation and holding facilities quickly reach capacity. When the facilities become full, gathers must be slowed or ceased. Altering the gather schedule has a domino effect on achieving AML on HMAs scheduled for gathering that year, gathers



in subsequent years. Several ranchers in the Midwest are under contract to hold wild horses, especially older, unadoptable animals, on a long-term basis to relieve the lack of holding space in BLM facilities.

A promising approach to improving the adoptability of wild horses is being implemented by the Nevada Department of Agriculture and Prisons. Recently, a wild horse inventory and habitat evaluation showed that 1000 wild horses were living in the Virginia Range of western Nevada where the habitat was suitable for only 500 individuals. In the [Virginia Range Estray Program](#), wild horses are taken to the Western Nevada Correctional Center and gentled for six weeks before nonprofit "placement" agencies sell them to qualifying private owners.

Photos of Wild Horses in Nevada:



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